

**Nund Rishi and Rishism: Exploring Rishi-Sufi *Shruks***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the *shruks* of Nund Rishi under the framework of mysticism. Sheikh Noor-ud-din, a moral guide and a reformist, popularly known as Nund Rishi is one of the greatest litterateurs who hailed from medieval Kashmir. Nund Rishi is remembered for his *shruks* that reflect his wisdom of Islam which he shared with the natives in the vernacular. In Kashmir, where differences are valorized, his *shruks* corresponds to interfaith dialogue surpassing all religions through the doctrine of Islamic mysticism. He erected the edifice of Rishism by preaching monotheism in a caste ridden society on the pedestals of the mission launched by Lal Ded. *Shruks* are a priceless possession and a legacy for the posterity. Also, the paper addresses how the narrative of the *shruks* is of importance in the contemporary Kashmir and promotes Kashmiriyat; the essence of being a Kashmiri.

**Keywords:** Rishism; Kashmir Sufism, Reshiyat, Divine Love, Unity, and Kashmiriyat

**Introduction:** The medieval period marks the inception of mysticism worldwide. Mysticism is generally accepted, as the science of the ultimate. It is a spiritual quest for the union with the divine. Mysticism has its roots in human history. The word ‘mysticism’ comes from Greek word *mycin* meaning ‘to close the eyes’, is also the root of ‘mystery’ (Faizili 9). The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the term ‘mysticism’ as “the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate state of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them.”

Mysticism is the esoteric aspect of conventional religion. Mysticism is related to the experience of the Divine that is the ultimate goal of any religion. Forms of mysticism are found in all major religions as it developed in the medieval period all over the world. “It has

intermittently appeared in Christianity notably in the writings of St. Augustine, and St. Avila...” (Fazili 7). In the Indian context, it dates back to the Upanishads. “Hindu mysticism was always regarded as part of philosophy and religion.... *Tat tvam Asi, Ayamatra Brahma, Aham Brahma Asmi* are an eloquent indication of how much Upanishads are imbued with mysticism” (Abraham 6).

Sufism is the mystical nucleus of Islam. “Sufism as it is known in the Muslim World, is Islamic Mysticism” (Lings 15). It is also known as inner (*batin*) dimension of Islam. Titus Burckhardt in *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* refers to Sufism as “Inward dimension of Islam” (223). Broadly, two origins of the word Sufi have been suggested, that is, *safa* meaning purity, and *wool* referring to the woolen garments the Sufi wore. The term came into existence in the second half of the eighth century. Sufism in Arabic is called as *Tasawwuf* and in Persian, it is called *Darwash* or *Sufi-Gari*. Sufism had its origin in the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, and had no connection with either Greek or Aryan influences. “These men are known by the term *Muqarrabin* (friends of God), *Sabirin* (Patient Men), *Abrar* (virtuous men), *Zuhhad* (pious men) in the Quran” (Shah 12-13). The path offered by Sufism leads one towards self-realization, and God realization as a timeless awakening by means of submission, love, and asceticism. It is a way of devotion, a way of love, and way of knowledge about God. However, the Sufism is based on two domains- outward and inward. Albeit, the two domains are distinct, they bear a very definite relationship to one another.

The outward religion or exoterism (known in Islam as the Sharia), may be likened to the circumference of a circle. The inner ‘Truth’ or esoterism that lies at the heart of the religion (Haqiqah) may be likened to the circles centre. The radius proceeding from circumference to centre represents the mystical or initiatic path (Tariqa) that leads from outward observance to inner conviction from belief to vision, from potency to act. (Fazili 10-11)

Sufism had a definite form before coming to India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Existing historiography on Sufism in medieval India is dominated by presence of some great Sufis of the Chishti order. The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most beautiful regions in the south Asian countries that is bestowed with natural resources by the Almighty. The valley of Kashmir is said to be the crown of Bharat and is called Kasheer in the vernacular.

Nilamat Puran deals with “the ancient history of Kashmir in respect of its creation, its original inhabitants-Nagas, Pisachas, and Brahmins, their style of living, customs, festivals, and topography” (Bhat 5).

**Sufism in the Valley of Kashmir:** Kashmir was referred to all through the world as a vital center of learning. P. N. K. Bamzai wrote in his book *Culture and Political History of Kashmir*, “In ancient times Kashmir was the ‘high school’ of Sanskrit and scholars from all parts of India came to the Valley to study at the feet of great teachers and savants.” (233). Kashmir was the cradle of Shaivistic philosophy, and Buddhist influence had taken deep roots in its environment. Historians of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries are of the view that Islam entered the snow clad mountains through the efforts of Iranian preachers; pirs and faqirs, by peaceful means but as a religion understandably propagating mystic way of life. Sufis from Central Asia and Persia found a compassionate home in Kashmir. Sayyid Sharaf-ud-din also known as Bulbul Shah, hailed from Turkistan and arrived in Kashmir during the reign of King Suhadeva (1301-1320). He was the first Sufi to enter the valley and belonged to the Suhrawardi order of the Sufis. Lha Chen Gyalbu Rinchana; the Buddhist King from Ladakh, was baptized into Islam at the hands of Bulbul Shah and became the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir and led to the establishment of Muslim Sultanate in 1320 into Kashmir. The conversion of the inhabitants of Kashmir to Islam was escalated by the coming of a host of Sayyids like Sayyid Jalal-ud-din of Bukhara, Sayyid Taj-ud-din, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani to name a few.

**Rishiyat; the Hallmark of Kashmiris and the Rishi Movement:** Kashmir was the abode of the Rishis long before the advent of Islam and it is for this reason, Kashmir is also called as *Rishwaer*- the Valley of Rishis or Rishi Vatika. The ancient Kashmir was a waterlogged area called as Satisar (Lake of Sati). Kashyap Rishi created an outlet in this waterlogged area through his miraculous deeds and the land that emerged after the desiccation of the lake water was named after the Rishi Kashyap as Kashyapmar and later became Kashmir. The word *Rishi* had already existed in the lingual ethos of Sanskrit as one who sings hymns in praise of the Lord, and was assimilated into medieval Kashmir. In Sanskrit literature, *Rishi* simply implies a saint or an ascetic. *Reosh* is the Kashmiri word for rishi (saint) which means spiritual leaders who dedicated their lives to meditation, service of mankind, and who left a good stock of wise sayings for the posterity. During the process of Islamic acculturation of Kashmir, the word *Rishi* was

Persianized as “Rishiyan-e-Kashmir” (Fazili 23). The Rishiyan-e-Kashmir was made into an order by patron saint Nund Rishi as “Universal Spiritual Discipline of Kashmir” (Gauhar 277). The change in the nomenclature from *Sufism* to *Rishism* was done by Nund Rishi and the Rishi-Sufi order as such was a Kashmir orientation to Sufi culture of Islam which flourished from the first half of fifteenth century in the valley of Kashmir was an indigenous Sufi order. Rishism deals with existence, unity, and divine love in its discourse of *taw hid/wahadat-ul-wujud* (unity of being). *Anal haqq* (I am truth), which may be experienced only when one realizes the unity of being (*taw hid/wahadat-ul-wujud*), and self-realization (*khodaghahi*) through self-purification, and divine love. Rishi-Sufis were devoted to God and had burning love for the creator. Nund Rishi was inspired by the Rishis before him and prayed the Almighty to bestow his grace on him in the following shruk:

Miran Rishi of Rishivan

Who lived for a thousand lunar months

In a state of union with God did he leave for his heavenly abode?

May God grant me the same spiritual power? (Khan 100)

Rishi-Sufis are not world negating seekers as they cherish the human body that abets in merging with the Supreme Being. The ultimate goal of a Mystic; Rishi-Sufi, is self-knowledge which implies that is, to be in the world but not of it is the true test of a seeker. The Rishi movement played a vital role in shaping the spiritual history of Kashmir.

**Nund Rishi; The Mystic Saint of Kashmir and The Divine Lover:** Sheikh Noor-ud-Din wali (1377-1438) was the saint-poet, who is commonly known as Sheikh-ul-Alam, Nund Rishi, Taj-ul-Awliya (the crown of saints of Kashmir) was born at Kaimoh, Kulgam. Sheikh was descendent of Rajputs that belonged to a district in Jammu called Kishtwar. His parents Sheikh Salar-ud-din and Sodermajji were converts to Islam. Right from the days of childhood, he showed signs of an extraordinary child; a seer. Lal Ded was the earliest source of inspiration for Nund Rishi and she is called as the foster mother to him. Legend has it that as a child, he refused to be breastfed by his mother and Lal Ded made a surprise appearance at Nund Rishi’s home and spoke the following words to the baby:

Thou was ashamed of not being born:

Why then art thou ashamed of sucking

(At the mother's breast). (Khan 97)

Thus, the child Nunda started taking milk. In this way, Lal Ded transmitted the spiritual waves that delved into his soul and contributed in his life to become a great spiritualist. "His poetry is in the form of *shruks* bears a distinct effect upon Kashmiri society" (Razdan 12). According to M. Amim Pandit, in his book *Alamdar-I-Kashmir: Standard-Bearer Patron-Saint of Kashmir*, "his verse sayings known as *Shruks* (from Sanskrit Sloka) in Sanskrit and regarded as Pandit's Language" (13). "A '*shruk*' literally means a knot or a puzzle" (Hanif 34). His sayings called *shruks* are collected and preserved in two volumes called as Rishi Nama and Nur Nama..." (Bamzai 69). Nund Rishi's mystical enterprise portrays him an ascetic who in order to know the religious truth withdraws himself from the worldly affairs and later advocates ethics of dynamic and positive nature by giving up the life of a recluse. Says Nund Rishi:

In the pursuit of mundane affairs my desires became limitless;

So I retired to the jungle, early in life,

May the Lord saturate the Rishi's mind with longing for Thee;

For I remember with gratitude how kind Thou art. (Khan 99)

Religion for Nund Rishi was a matter of experience. Thus, he influenced the course of Islamic acculturation in the valley as the history of Islam in Kashmir is bound up integrally with the mystical, philosophic insights, moral and aesthetic sensibilities of Nund Rishi. The natives of Kashmir owe a debt of gratitude to Nund Rishi as his *shruks* are of abiding value and are referred as Kashmiri Quran. His *shruks* are ceaseless verses about God, unity of being, self-knowledge, and divine love.

### **Kashmiriyat: The Essence of Being a Kashmiri**

Since Kashmir lies at the crossroads of the south, central, and East Asia, it can be studied as a region where multi-religious interactions, composite practices, and multiple imperial influences alongside the indigenous came together to produce its own distinct social culture. In

spite of its rich religious and secular history, the present situation in Kashmir poses a challenge to its past secular image. “Kashmir has established itself as the living laboratory of mutual understanding, tolerance, amity, and peaceful co-existence. This trait of Kashmiriyat has, at times, in the course of history, faced tense challenges.” (Gauhar 129). Kashmiriyat is an idea that can be traced to the historical past of Kashmir. Brig. Gupta states in his article, “Countering Radicalization in the Valley,” that Kashmiriyat is the backbone of the philosophy of co-existence in the valley....” Kashmiriyat is the confluence of its land and people following different faiths; Sufism, Shaivism, Sikhism, and Buddhism.”

It is fiction, and poetry that has provided the creative outlet for Kashmiri writers across the political spectrum to voice their fears, disillusionment, and hopes. The real history of Kashmiri literature began with the verses of the great saint-woman poet, Lalleshwari (1320-1390) in the fourteenth century. Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, who were dear to both the Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir, were the founding figures of Kashmiri literature. Following the imprints of Lal Ded, “Sheikh was the first mass leader of Kashmir who set up a composite culture of tolerance having pure faith in moral values based on local values” (Gauhar 146). Nund Rishi like Murshid and taalib paid tribute to his spiritual mentor in the following words:

That one of Padmanpur, that Lalla...

Nectar by mouthfuls she was drinking.

Everywhere she looked she saw Shiva:

Lord... on me such a gift be bestowing! (Smith 36)

The middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was a period of religious and moral fermentation in Kashmir. Kashmir, being the watershed of many races and ethnic groups, “new values were being set up in art and literature and a chain of action and reaction resulted in a slow and imperceptible synthesis of the two fundamentally opposite cultures” (Banzai 65). The idea of sharing traditions came to be called as the Hindu-Muslim, ‘Rishi-Sufi’ movement. In the medieval period, there was a clear socio-cultural assimilation process in Kashmir. Also, Sheikh composed a framework of disciplined Rishis who maintained and promoted nearby customs. “The Rishis- the indigenous order of Sufis in Kashmir emerged in response to the forcible

conversion of Brahmins and whole scale destruction of their temples at the hands of Malik Suha Bhatt and Sultan Sikander. The Rishis influenced the philosophical beliefs of people by propagating the ideal of religious tolerance” (Bamzai 69). The Sheikh rose against the rifts between Brahmin and Mullah and preached communal harmony and mutual concordance. Nund Rishi was critical of the attitudes of the bigots and says:

Holy Adam, was the father of us all...  
And the mother of us all was holy Eve.  
So where were all the castes from, all?  
How can some of one family deceive? (Smith 56)

Nund Rishi believed in oneness of God and accepted this truth as the end of all knowledge. As a child, he reiterated only the letter Alif of the Arabic alphabets. As a saint, he understood the social inequalities prevalent in brahmanical society and propagated oneness of God and preached unity among the fellow beings.

If you practise oneness (in life), you'll lose your identity,  
Behold how the one shines resplendently!  
Neither your intellect nor your mind can comprehend this,  
My dear, who can drink that deep stream (of knowledge)? (Dhar 191)

Nund Rishi, on one occasion saw a group of men feigning to meditate on God and had no real love for God. He attacked hypocrites in the following words:

By bowing down you'll not become a Rishi...  
Pounder in rice-mill didn't ever raise up head.  
By entering a cave, God attained cannot be  
Mongoose and rat never out of holes lift head.  
By bathing, mind won't get clean, obviously:

The fish and the otter... never any bank ascended.

If God were pleased by fasting one would see

the destitute had never food in the pot cooked! (Smith 19-20)

He wanted his followers to perform good deeds, preaching that self-annihilation, love, and persistence to God abets in leading a disciplined life. Says Nund Rishi:

That One is close to me, I to that One:

Being near that One I peace discovered.

Outwardly, I wrongly sought the One:

Inside I discovered my Friend... indeed! (Smith 33)

Nund Rishi advised to associate oneself in a good company as good will bring the best out of one and the rogue will wrong the good. Nund Rishi exhorts and abhors bad company and remarked:

Spend all your days with the good,

For the finest rice will get pounded.

Never go about with the wicked...

Don't go near pots, soot covered! (Smith 21)

Nund Rishi's multidimensional identity was cherished by individuals belonging to all religions. All Kashmiris revered him as Alamdar-e-Kashmir, Muslims called him 'Sheikh' and Kashmiri Pandits called 'Sahajanand'. "Sheikh Noor-ud-Din was a saint, writer, thinker, leader, missionary, teacher, pioneer environmentalist, the linguist who played a noteworthy role in establishing and shaping the culture of Kashmir" (Gauhar 144). His *shruks* corresponds to the interfaith dialogue by surpassing all religions. The ultimate goal of Nund Rishi as a mystic saint poet was upliftment of individual self, which permeates from the self to the family, to state, and nation as a whole leading to universal good that will usher in a peaceful and conflict-free world.

**Conclusion:** Nund Rishi played a key role within the framework of social order in Kashmir. The message underlying the *shruks* are addressed to mankind as a race. He expressed his wisdom of

Quran in the vernacular to connect the unlettered masses of Kashmir with love. It is important to revive the sublime traditions that preached the message of love and brotherhood regardless of one's caste, creed or religion. To imbibe the essence of the *shruks* within oneself is the need of hour. It is worth exploring *shruks* that leave imprints of spiritual, intellectual, and psychological influence on everyday life and the people of Kashmir. It is therefore important "to emphasize the legacy of Kashmir's indigenous secularism, with references to medieval Kashmir saint-poet Sheikh Nooruddin ..." (Tak 30). Nund Rishi's *Shruks* are rejoinder to the politics of fundamentalism in Kashmir. The ways of living together adapted by Kashmiri locals to thrive in a composite culture without turning antagonistic to each other in an anti-conflictual manner can be best explained by the mystic insights of Nund Rishi.

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